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# **The influence of mystery and morality plays on the work of William Shakespeare**

**David Fincham**

*This article considers the origin and nature of medieval mystery and morality plays, and the extent to which the characters and religious themes of these plays influenced the work of William Shakespeare. David Fincham is a lecturer in Catholic School Leadership at St Mary's University, Twickenham.*

## **Introduction**

Scholars have studied a variety of aspects of William Shakespeare's life and work in detail across the centuries, exploring not only his language and his poetic style, but also questions about the disputed authorship of his plays. The subject of whether or not Shakespeare was a closet Catholic (his father, having been born before the Reformation, would have been Catholic), has also been discussed. It was even reported in the Daily Telegraph (18 November 2011) that, according to *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's daily newspaper, Shakespeare's plays 'teem with open references to the Catholic religion.'

## **The relationship with the Church**

The main purpose of the mystery and morality plays was didactic, for they not only provided entertainment, but were also a source of moral guidance for the people. Based on the biblical stories that were read at Mass, they were dramatic productions that were designed to communicate principles of the Christian faith to their audiences.

Drama has always had an intimate relationship with religion since before the time of the ancient Greeks and it shares many common features, including dressing up, narrative, physical space and audience. Indeed, it can be argued that the Mass itself is a form of drama. Religious themes provided a significant source of inspiration for the subject matter of mystery and morality plays. Evolving from the performance of Christian stories in church as part of the liturgy, they developed into religious processions and pageants that were a central feature of Christian feast days and Holy Days (hence the word 'holiday' from which it is derived) during the Middle Ages – a vestige of which can be found in the Holy Week processions of today.

During these holiday festivals, actors would present short dramatic scenes on passing carts for the entertainment and edification of the citizens. The plays would be performed sequentially in cycles and they would last for a number of days.

In addition to the spectacle, at relevant times of the year, such as at Easter, Whitsun, Corpus Christi and Christmas, mystery and morality plays and their derivatives provided a means of conveying Christian values to the populace. At a time when Mass was conducted in Latin and most people were illiterate, the plays were presented in English, which meant that they were accessible to all the people and it made it easier for them to listen to and understand the message that was being presented.

## **Mystery and morality plays**

There were no permanent theatres in England prior to the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, but in towns in the north of England and the Midlands, such as Wakefield, York, Chester and Coventry, there was a tradition of street theatre that had originated during the fourteenth century. These were referred to as mystery and morality plays. Encouraged by the Church to spread the Christian message, these plays continued to flourish into the early decades of Queen Elizabeth I's reign.

Whilst mystery and morality plays had much in common, particularly as they presented aspects of Christian faith, it is nevertheless possible to distinguish between the two genres. For example, mystery plays (from mystery used in its sense of a miracle – though it might alternatively have been derived from the Latin *misterium* meaning 'occupation', since they were often authorised by town guilds) dramatised stories from the Bible, drawing on subjects such as the Creation, Adam and Eve, Moses and the Tablets of Stone, the Resurrection and the Last Judgement; or from tales of Christian saints, such as St George and the Dragon. They presented themes of tragedy and comedy, sadness and joy. When, in the course of time, the guilds became responsible for organising the performances, it became common for each guild to adopt a play that was appropriate to its trade. In the York mystery cycle, there were 48 plays, each of about three hours in length.

Morality plays can be considered as allegories in which the main character would be enticed by temptations aimed at persuading him to adopt a good or a bad life. Thus, he would meet a series of individual characters who represented personifications of abstract qualities, such as Good Deeds, Knowledge, Sin, Grace, Repentance and Death. The morality genre, then, provided a platform for the portrayal of the struggle between good and evil in dramatic form. In one of these plays, *Everyman*, the main character, represented humanity as a whole. At the denouement of the play, when the protagonist dies, it showed that, beyond the grave, he would be accompanied only by Good Deeds. Another of these plays in this genre was entitled, *The Castle of Perseverance*, which portrayed the spiritual journey of man from Creation to the Day of Judgment.

By the end of the sixteenth century, though, following their suppression in the wake of the Reformation, the tradition of mystery and morality plays died out. It was only with their revival in the twentieth century that they gained in popularity once again. Indeed, in 2016 the York cycle of plays was performed in York Minster.

## **The potential influence on Shakespeare**

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is likely to have been aware of the tradition of mystery and morality plays when he was growing up in Stratford-upon-Avon, as it is possible that travelling bands of peripatetic actors would have stopped to perform these plays in the town. Indeed, it is speculated that he may have even seen performances of the Coventry plays. It is reasonable to assume therefore that during his childhood, witnessing the annual pageants that took place at Corpus Christi, he may well have been influenced by them and that they may have resonated with him in later life. Thus, the plays that were written by Shakespeare could have been inspired, directly or indirectly, by mystery and morality plays. Indeed, Potter (1975: 124) argues that Shakespeare's characters

“...inherit the functions of conventional morality characters: (such as) the central and mutable hero, the agent of sin and temptation, and the agent of repentance and good counsel”.

It is not unreasonable to assume therefore that, as the allegorical character-types of the mystery and morality plays gave way to more rounded characters with names and distinct personality traits, audiences (who would have been aware of the tradition of stock characters and plots that informed the earlier plays) would recognise them within the context of Shakespeare's plays. If that were the case, it would be possible to explore the potential influence that mystery and morality plays may have had on Shakespearean drama.

To what extent does Shakespeare utilize aspects of familiar motifs and characters drawn from the medieval mystery and morality plays? **Notwithstanding** that Shakespeare's characters are more developed and complex, it is worth reflecting upon the extent to which characters and themes drawn from the plays of an earlier era inform the characters and themes from plays such as *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Richard III* respectively.

### **Macbeth**

It is possible to discern the influence of the mystery and morality plays on the work of Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, where the conflict between good and evil is a pervasive theme. This play can be compared to a kind of morality play, in which the eponymous protagonist, whose duty should be to uphold justice under the law, instead reduces his kingdom to despair, anguish and anarchy. The play shows how Macbeth, who struggles with his conscience against the malevolent influence of the egregious Lady Macbeth, and urged on by the sinister enchantments of the malign witches, succumbs to the forces of evil.

In contrast to Macbeth's treachery, Malcolm and MacDuff emerge as characters who represent forces for good. Their integrity provides a fitting contrast to the degradations inflicted by the immoral actions of Macbeth upon his country. In the typical morality play, it is the protagonist, who, whilst essentially good, makes some mistakes but is ultimately redeemed. In *Macbeth* however, the main character, seduced by the schemes of evil-doers, is ultimately destroyed. In Christian terms, the tragedy of *Macbeth* may be considered as a story of temptation, sin and retribution.

### **Othello**

It is evident too that the Christian tropes present in the mystery and morality plays can be identified and explored in *Othello*. Thus, the original audiences would probably recognise the origins of the main characters, though they were manifestly more complex and multifaceted than the personified characterizations of abstract qualities that appeared in the mystery and morality plays.

The malicious character of Iago, for example, in manipulating the protagonist Othello and misleading him into thinking that his wife Desdemona has been unfaithful to him, can be compared with Vice, a stock character of the morality plays, who became the pre-eminent tempter in medieval drama. In the morality plays, Vice was originally portrayed as the devil's

servant but in later plays he replaces the devil and becomes the principal representation of evil. Thus, Iago is portrayed as an artful seducer, comparable to Satan in the Garden of Eden, who successfully deceives Othello into believing his insinuations of Desdemona's infidelity.

Othello on the other hand can be considered as an Everyman character who, subject to Iago's relentless cunning, ultimately submits to temptation. Significantly, Othello's suspicion and jealousy is provoked by Iago in Act 3 scene 3— often described as the 'temptation scene'. The scene begins in the garden of the castle (in an echo of the Garden of Eden), where Iago lures Othello towards the doubt and hatred that lead eventually to the murder of his innocent wife.

### **King Lear**

Whether it is a religious play or not, in *King Lear*, as in the mystery and morality plays, Christian themes are pervasive. For example, from a Christian perspective, it could be argued that, as a result of his experiences during the course of the play, Lear ultimately finds redemption through suffering.

Though it is acknowledged that the characters in this play develop and display complex roles, they nevertheless seem at different points to represent moral stereotypes. Amongst other things, for example, the play presents us with the struggle between good and evil. While on the one hand Lear's older daughters, Regan and Goneril, can be conceived as personifications of evil, on the other hand Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia, can be regarded as a Christ-like character, who though innocent, is ultimately put to death. Significantly, in the final scene of the play, Lear appears on the stage carrying her in his arms – ostensibly, an allusion to the *Pieta* (an image of the Virgin Mary holding her dead son in her arms).

In *King Lear*, too, mercy is shown to be greater than justice, ending the atavistic cycle of vengeance and judgment based on retaliation and revenge. Justice without mercy is deleterious. Mercy is inspired by grace and love. In the words of James (2.13): 'Mercy triumphs over judgement.'

### **Richard III**

There are many remarkable similarities between Shakespeare's *Richard III* and the mystery plays. As in the mystery plays, a conflict between the forces of good and evil is again evident. This is demonstrated in particular by the behaviour of the main character, Richard III, whom Shakespeare depicts as a representation of evil.

There are a number of similarities between *Richard III* and the mystery plays. The character of Richard III for example can be compared with the character of Herod. Thus, in the respective plays, they are both presented as cripples and they are both responsible for the death of innocents. In both the Towneley and Chester cycles, when the Magi do not return, Herod orders his knights to kill all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two.

In Shakespeare's play, Richard is also guilty of ordering the murder of innocents. Thus, he instructs Tyrrell to dispose of the princes in the tower and Tyrrell, in turn, arranges to have them murdered. Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, aware of who is culpable of the deaths of her grandchildren, curses him:

Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end;  
Shame serves thy life, and doth thy death attend.

(IV. iv. 195-196)

In both the mystery plays and in Shakespeare, there is the fulfilment of a prophecy that both kings will be overthrown.

It is hoped that this exploration of the possible influences of the mystery and morality plays will stimulate deeper study and understanding of Shakespeare's plays and their relation to Christian faith.

## Reference

Robert Potter, *English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition*  
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